

Saving the All-Volunteer Force

Charles C. Moskos, Ph.D.

THE U.S. Armed Forces' desired end strength, especially that of the Army, has become a subject of major concern. Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, and other deployments have heightened military manpower demands, and great apprehension exists that Reserve Components (RCs) especially are experiencing severe recruitment and reenlistment problems.

The most practical way of alleviating shortfalls and excessive reliance on RCs is to introduce a short-enlistment option targeted at college students and recent college graduates. The enlistment option would require 15 months of active duty. Such 15-month enlistees could perform many of the roles RCs and some active-duty personnel now perform.

A definite, albeit limited, market exists of college graduates who might volunteer for military service if the active-duty commitment is only 15 months and comes with generous educational benefits. During fall 2002, the enlistment propensities of undergraduates were assessed in surveys conducted at Northwestern University at Chicago, and the Universities of Arizona, California at Los Angeles, and Illinois at Chicago. Northwestern University completed a similar survey in October 2004. These were the first and only surveys on enlistment propensity ever conducted on university campuses.

Educational Benefits

Educational benefits ranged from \$60,000 for a 4-year enlistment to \$15,000 for a 15-month enlistment. Across all universities, shorter terms had a notably positive effect on enlistment propensity. Twenty-three percent of those participating in the survey indicated an enlistment propensity for the 15-month option (with \$15,000 in educational benefits), but only 2 percent were inclined to favor the 4-year option (with \$60,000 in educational benefits).

The October 2004 survey at Northwestern even asked if students would consider serving as prison guards in places like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo if their student loans were forgiven and they received G.I. Bill benefits for graduate school. Eleven percent said that such service would be a "very likely" option; another 18 percent said they would "consider" such an option.

Two-thirds of American high-school graduates now go on to some form of higher education. Of these, about half will graduate with a bachelor's degree. Each year, 1.2 million young people graduate with a bachelor's degree, yet military recruitment of college graduates at the enlisted level is minuscule.

The average college graduate today leaves with about \$19,000 in debt. Forty percent of college graduates state they intend to go on to some form of graduate study. A higher percentage of youth now go on to graduate school than went to undergraduate schools during the post-World War II years of the original G.I. Bill. The average debt of a student who attends graduate school is \$38,000.

Few students at the more selective universities had close relatives or friends who served in the military. No correlation exists between enlistment propensity and military knowledge. (Half of the students did not know a colonel had a higher rank than a major.) No correlation exists between political values and enlistment propensity. Liberals and conservatives have the same propensity—low for both—to volunteer for the Armed Forces.

Arguments Against a 15-Month Enlistment

Opponents of the short-enlistment option raise three arguments against it. The first asserts that "short enlistments would increase demands on the training base." Let us remember that almost one-third of those now entering military service fail to

complete their initial enlistments. Soldiers signing up for long (4- to 6-year) enlistments have attrition rates 1-1/2 times greater than those who enlist for 2 years. Completing an enlistment term strongly correlates with higher education; it is much better to have a soldier serve 15 months honorably than be discharged prematurely. A 15-month enlistment option would reduce personnel turnover and counter shortfalls in end strength.

The second argument opponents of short enlistments put forth is that "today's military requires highly technical skills that cannot be met by short-termers." Precisely. The Armed Forces should offer higher compensation to those whose skills require extended training and experience. In the draft era, the pay ratio between a senior noncommissioned officer and a private was 6 to 1; today it is less than 3 to 1. The military should give future pay raises to its career soldiers.

Fifteen-month enlistees could fill jobs that would require only a short formal training period or even only on-the-job training. For example, a major morale problem among Reservists is pulling guard duty at installations. Guard duty would be an appropriate task for a short-term enlistee.

The total length of training for military police officers—from the time they enter service to completion of training—is 14 weeks. The short-term enlistee would be ideally suited for duties in peace-keeping missions such as in Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Sinai. Surveys show such missions are the most appealing to college students. Indeed, short-enlistment soldiers are especially well suited to those military occupational specialties now experiencing recruitment shortfalls and excessive reliance on RCs. Also well documented is that recruits who have higher educations have markedly lower attrition rates and the skills and motivation to quickly learn a wide variety of military jobs.

The third argument commonly advanced against short-term enlistment asserts that "a short-enlistment option would attract soldiers who otherwise would sign up for a longer enlistment." Quite the contrary. A 15-month enlistment accompanied by educational

benefits would attract college students and graduates who never would have considered entering the Armed Forces. The short-term option could capitalize on the fact that there is a dual market in recruitment. One group would volunteer for military service based on salary, skill training, and career benefits; the other, to obtain a paid, temporary break between college and graduate studies or between school and a career. Recruiting only 10 percent of college graduates would end recruitment woes.

Recommendations

The United States should—

- Consider a cohort enlistment for certain colleges to recruit enlistees to serve in specified peace-keeping missions.

- Emphasize military service as a rewarding experience between undergraduate and graduate school or between school and career.

- Use single-term veterans as part-time recruiters.

- Consider linking federal aid for higher education to some form of national service. (Under the present system, through federal grants and loan subsidies, the government now pays students not to serve their country. We now have a G.I. Bill without the G.I.)

- Establish a commission to look at military recruitment, Homeland Security needs, civilian national service, and federal student aid.

Without attracting significant numbers of college graduates, military recruitment will most likely experience a lowering of entrance standards; higher entry pay and larger enlistment bonuses; an expanded recruitment force; increased contracting-out of military functions; and more recruitment of non-American citizens.

We should also keep in mind the long-term benefits for the country if military service becomes more common among privileged youth. We will have future civilian leaders who have had a rewarding military experience and who might be future part-time recruiters, which can only be to the advantage of the Armed Forces and the Nation. **MR**

Charles C. Moskos, Ph.D., a former draftee, is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Northwestern University, Chicago, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He received a B.A. from Princeton University and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles. He has been awarded the Distinguished Service Award, the U.S. Army's highest decoration for a civilian, and has been designated an Honored Patriot by the Selective Service System. His article "The American Volunteer Soldier: Will He Fight?" appeared in the January-February 1997, Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Issue of Military Review.